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ABSTRACT

The dynamics of human development are somehow programmed to produce failure for black male children. On tests of academic achievement black male ninth graders perform less well than peers: the black male child is more likely to be suspended from and/or to drop out of school. Data indicate that most black male elementary school students, while respecting education, show no appreciation for excellence in school. Students performing at low levels receive little encouragement from family members. Role models usually were family members or others close to the family. Most did not view their race and gender as disadvantaging characteristics. Interviews involving incarcerated black male adults indicated that (1) few "good things" had been part of their lives, (2) they had an internalized appreciation for the family and a pattern of viewing close family members as models, (3) they had experienced discomfort and, frequently, failure in school, (4) incomprehension and conflict characterized their relationships with females, and (5) they had assumed full responsibility for the outcome of their lives. In sum, a network of negative factors is at work against the black male child as he struggles to become an adult, involving father absence, conflict in male-female relationships, developmental risks at school, competition with white males, and impediments to sequential and continuous skill development. Conditions enabling the positive development of black males must be provided in families and at school. (RH)

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BLACK MALE CHILD DEVELOPMENT: A BROKEN MODEL

A Report On Six Years Of Formal Observation And Study

Presented to: The National Black Child Development Institute
16th Annual Conference
Miami, Florida
October 8-10, 1986

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Presented by: Dr. Robert E. Bridges, Superintendent
Wake County Public School System
Raleigh, North Carolina

I would like to express my appreciation to the Black Child Development Institute for the invitation to address this national conference. My participation represents an opportunity for me to share some thoughts on a topic of great interest to me and, I hope, to this audience. But more importantly, I look forward to the opportunity to exchange ideas informally with conference participants on an even broader basis as relates to black child development. My comments today will focus on black male child development. I will attempt to profile about six years of consistent observation and formal study of the black male child and certain developmental symptoms and outcomes that appear to signal the presence of abnormal and perhaps unique obstacles in his developmental path. Academic achievement data will be presented which will outline the performance of the black male child in relation to his peers. School suspension statistics will be presented to demonstrate the black male student's "at-risk" status in the school setting. The results of personal interviews with sixth and ninth graders during the 1985-86 school year will be summarized.

A total of forty hours was spent in study, observations and personal interviews with inmates at the North Carolina Central Prison in Raleigh, North Carolina. I will share the response pattern from these sessions. Statistics will be discussed related to black male behavior in school, in the home and in the broader society. I believe there is a serious and growing problem. My purpose is to sound an alarm. My observations and study to this point have been revealing and tremendously engaging both personally and professionally. I will offer no solutions. Actually,

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the search for solutions has not yet begun. Our challenge presently is to identify and to understand as many functional pieces of the problem as can be confirmed. I will offer some conclusions to date and share additionally in an area more appropriately labeled "beliefs to date".

Black male child development has been a point of high interest for me throughout my professional career. As a beginning sixth grade teacher in 1962, I can recall questioning the black male students' lack of sturdiness in the classroom. Too often average and above average potential for academic achievement was extremely difficult to cultivate in this child. As I became more skilled as a teacher in finding ways to motivate eleven and twelve year olds, I also became increasingly conscious of what I would term developmental obstructions that dampened the black male child's appetite for learning. I came to wonder about his basic perception of himself as a human being and his relationship to the environment. As the only male teacher on a faculty, I had an advantage that other teachers did not enjoy. Youngsters came to my classroom at the beginning of each year excited about having a male teacher for the first time. The first major challenge of the classroom was handled without a serious effort on my part. But even in this heightened state of readiness, the black male child struggled to take part. I frequently failed to build a confidence base sound enough to sustain him through a year of achievement at a level commensurate not only with his potential but also with that of his female counterpart.

During the 1979-80 school year, I was Assistant Superintendent for Student Services in the Wake County Public School System. A neighborhood child surfaced as a perplexing abnormality. This very normal black thirteen-year-old male was exhibiting surprising and negative behaviors at home and at school and seemed determined to leave home and find his way literally in the street. For reasons that probably could be classified as more personal than professional, I pulled all available student records on this youngster from the time he entered formal schooling and commenced a thorough analysis. I later spent long hours reviewing with his parents the relationships and experiences within the family setting.

All three of us gained greatly from this examination of family dynamics. The tip of the proverbial iceberg surfaced for me at that point. This young man has spent at least three of the past seven years in confinement. Shortly following that experience, I began to examine black male child data within the school system. One outcome was a profile of the academic achievement of a group of black male students between 1981 and 1985 as measured by the California Achievement Test (CAT).

Each year students in the Wake County Public School System have their reading, language and math skills evaluated using the California Achievement Test. This program provides a yardstick with which to measure a student's skills development. On a larger scale, the test results can be used to identify trends within a classroom, school, and the school system as a whole. A computer program was developed to ascertain whether black male students achieve lower test scores than the other students within the school system. In order to analyze this situation properly, it first was determined whether blacks achieve as well as non-blacks and also whether there was any difference in achievement between male and female students. Although it was possible to analyze differences for each racial group (ie. white, Hispanic, American Indian, etc.), all races other than black were pooled for two reasons. First, the main objective concerned the performance of black males compared to all others. Secondly, analysis of each individual race would produce some categories that would include too few students to be illuminating or accurate. Therefore, the performance of black males was evaluated against a pooled non-black racial category. The two main questions examined in this study were as follows:

1) Do black male students have lower standardized test scores than their counterparts?

2) Is there any point in time that black male students are not scoring significantly lower on the standardized tests than their counterparts?

The California Achievement Test scale scores for the years 1981 thru 1985 were used for students who were ninth graders during the 1985-86 school year. Student locator file information for the 1985-86

school year was used to ensure that the students within this study still attended the Wake County Public School System (see Table 1 for racial and sexual breakdown of students presently enrolled). Only those students who had completed all reading, math and language examinations every year in the study period were included in the analysis. Table 2 lists the racial and sexual demography of the students in the study sample.

Table 1
Racial and Sexual Demography
Wake County Public School System - 1985-86 School Year

	Ninth Grade		
	Blacks	Non-Blacks	
Females	659	1956	2615
Males	776	1994	2770
	1435	3950	5385

Table 2
Racial and Sexual Demography
Black Male Achievement Study Sample

	Ninth Grade		
	Blacks	Non-Blacks	
Females	217	775	992
Males	153	626	779
	370	1401	1771

Analysis of variance techniques was used to detect differences between the sex and race categories. Linear contrasts compared black scores against non-black scores, female scores against male scores, and whether blacks performed similarly in each sex category. These contrasts were applied to the scale scores for each year and also to the differences between scale scores for adjacent years (gain between years). From

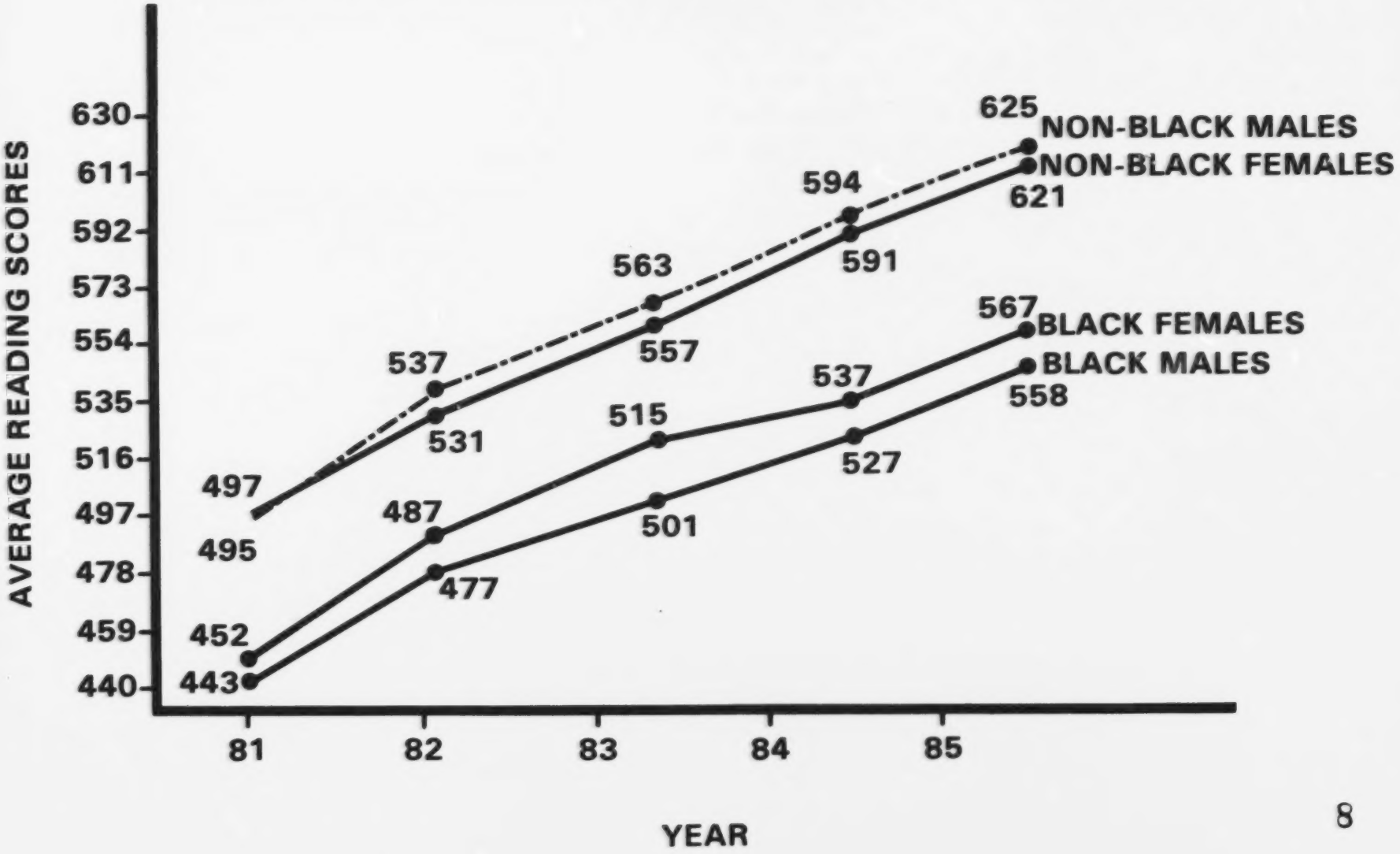
these contrasts, inferences were made concerning the strength of racial and sexual differences in the achievement levels of the students. Graphs 1a through 1d (ninth grade mean scale scores) illustrate the findings.

Regardless of the subtest or year of testing, significant differences were detected in the average test scores among the sex and race subgroups. In all cases, black males attained the lowest average scores within the study sample. For the reading and math tests, the significant test differences were due mainly to the performance of all blacks (male and female). On language examinations, not only are black students scoring significantly less than non-black students, but males are scoring significantly less than females. For black males, these sex and race differences are working in unison to cause them to score the lowest of all students. Total battery scores of black male ninth graders were the lowest of all sex/race groups, reflecting their similar position for reading, math and language scores.

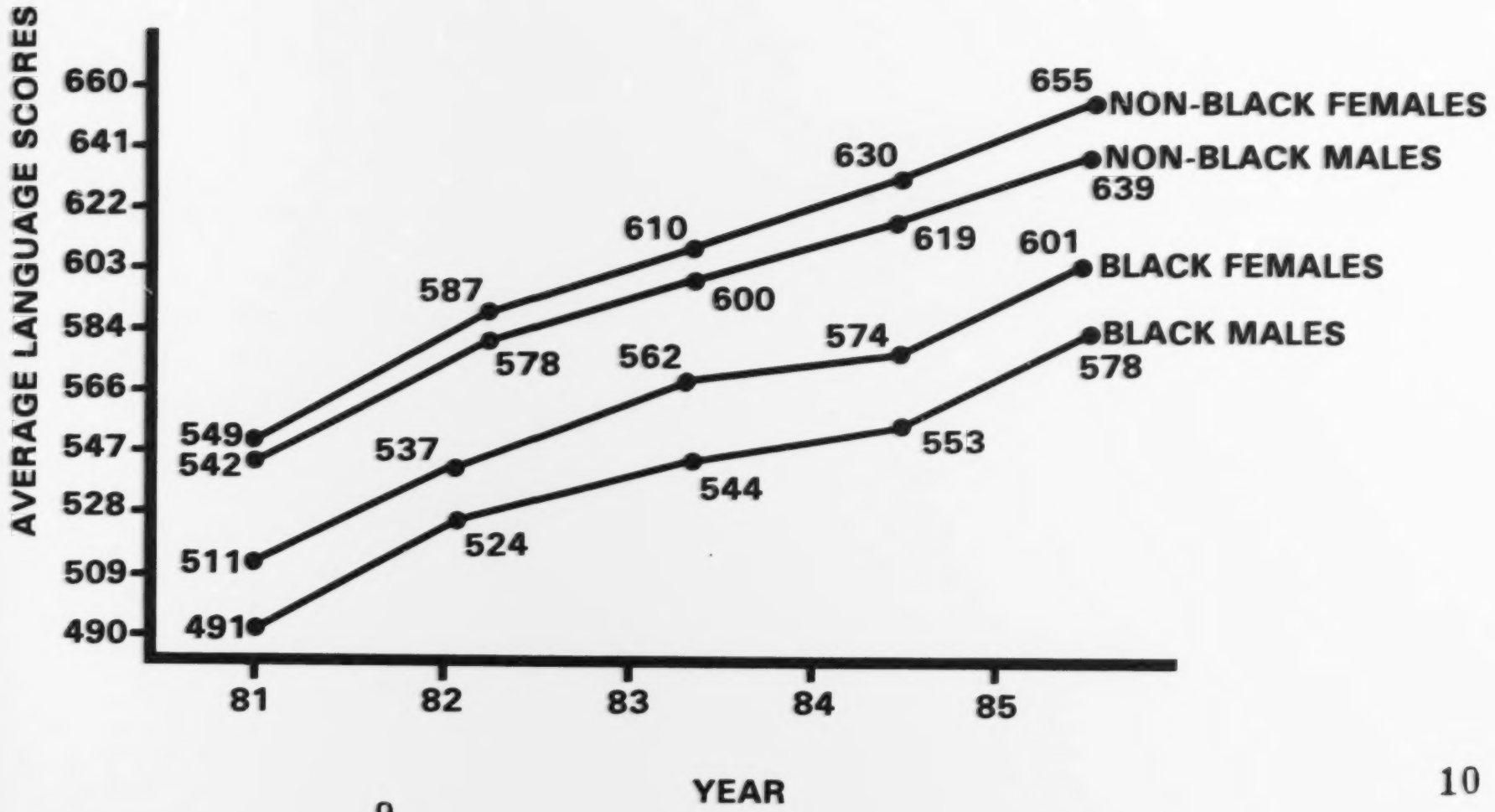
These facts suggest that blacks are already behind when achievement testing is initiated and continue to lag as they progress through school. The gains in test performance from year to year are oftentimes equal regardless of sex and race; thus, the differences that are present at the third grade remain in place forcing black students to play "catch-up" with the rest of their classmates.

The black male child is more likely to be suspended from school and/or to drop out of school prematurely than his peers. While much of the causation is believed to be associated with institutional preference and the behavioral expectations thereof, it frequently becomes the mission of this youngster to resist authority and establish himself as an independent spirit in the school setting. He avoids competing in normal school activities where success is elusive and functions on the edge with regard to rules and regulations. Table 3 profiles long-term suspension activity for the student group monitored from 1982-1985 and discussed earlier.

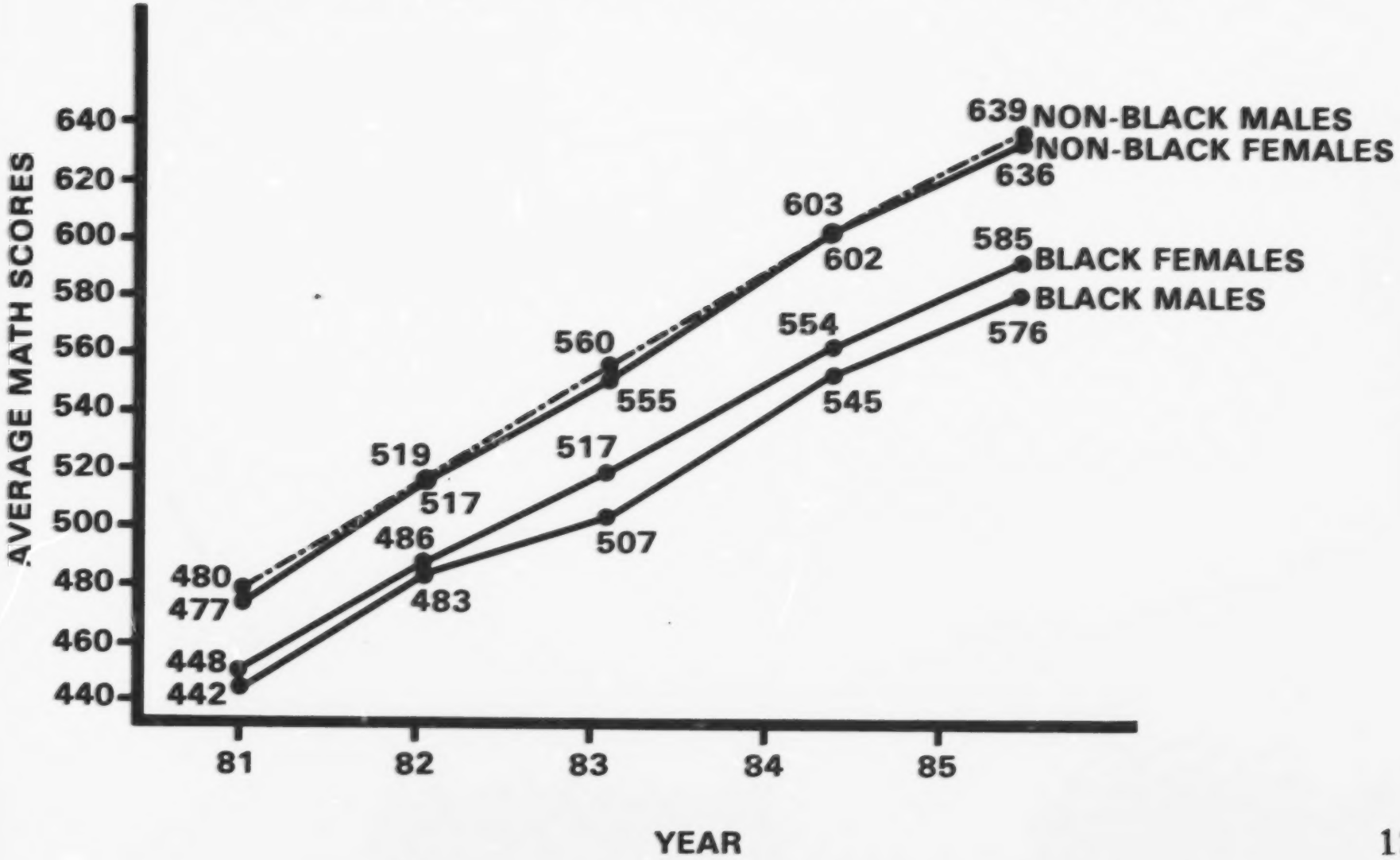
GRAPH 1A
AVERAGE CAT READING SCORES 1981-1985
WAKE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM — 9TH GRADE



GRAPH 1B
AVERAGE CAT LANGUAGE SCORES 1981 - 1985
WAKE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM - 9TH GRADE



GRAPH 1C
AVERAGE CAT MATH SCORES 1981 - 1985
WAKE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM - 9TH GRADE



GRAPH 1D

AVERAGE CAT TOTAL BATTERY SCORES 1981 - 1985
WAKE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM - 9TH GRADE

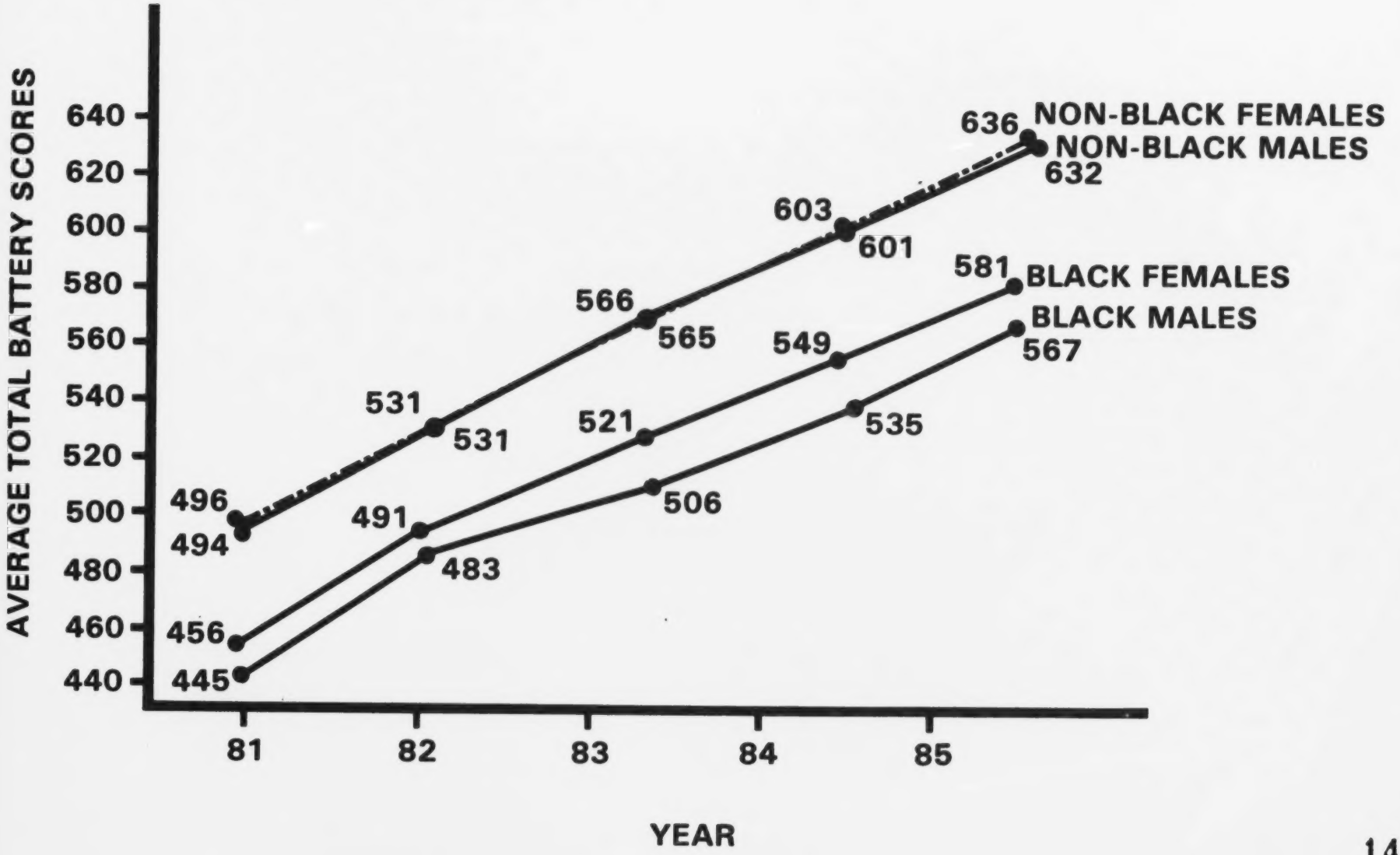


Table 3
Wake County Public School System
Race And Sex Analysis
System Totals
Long-Term Suspension Data
1982-83 thru 1985-86

	1982-83	
	Students	Percent
BM	73	55%
WM	38	29%
OM	1	1%
BF	11	8%
WF	9	7%
OF	0	0%
TOTAL	132	

	1983-84	
	Students	Percent
BM	50	53%
WM	29	31%
OM	0	0%
BF	10	11%
WF	5	5%
OF	0	0%
TOTAL	94	

	1984-85	
	Students	Percent
BM	51	41%
WM	52	41%
OM	1	1%
BF	13	10%
WF	9	7%
OF	0	0%
TOTAL	126	

	1985-86	
	Students	Percent
BM	68	46%
WM	53	35%
OM	0	0%
BF	12	8%
WF	16	11%
OF	0	0%
TOTAL	149	

In the spring of 1986, the standardized test data reviewed above provided the first concrete profile of actual students involved in this continuing study. Having analyzed individual data on many of these youngsters, I determined that much could probably be gained from a personal exchange with students. Dr. George W. Noblet, Associate Professor at the University of North Carolina, was engaged to design an interview instrument focusing on the following discussion areas:

- School experience - the best and worst years of school and why. Perceptions of the teacher and feelings about the school place. How would students improve the school?
- Family - relationships and feelings. Expectations in general. Attitudes about school and learning on the part of the parents.
- Role Models - people they admire and would like to grow up to be like. Who has had the greatest influence on their development?
- Student's perceptions of being a black male - has it been a disadvantage with regard to school and growing up in general?

Graduate students from the University of North Carolina assisted with the personal interviews. All interviews were recorded. The interview process involved sixty black males who were students in grades six and nine during the 1985-86 school year. Twenty-nine ninth graders were interviewed, and thirty-one sixth graders had the experience. The students were randomly selected to represent three performance levels. Groupings involved the highest third, the middle third and the lowest third of all students taking the California Achievement Test. Certain responses were consistent throughout the interview sessions and are offered below by discussion area.

- School experience - Frequently for this group of students, the best years of school were the early years. The higher performers seemed to relate the good times to standard points like a change in schools or a special school event. The worst years were associated most often with retention or memories of "getting behind". Teachers were frequently viewed as taskmasters. These youngsters rarely mentioned the teacher with warmth or adoration. I asked a low performing ninth grader what he would most like to have his teachers know about him that they didn't know. His prompt reply was "that I do want to learn". While most students interviewed expressed genuine respect for getting an education, there seemed

to be an absence of an appreciation for excellence in school. Most struggled without success in attempting to offer suggestions to improve school for their benefit.

- Family - The black male child clings tenaciously to his oft-fragmented home group, and the closest ties are to his mother. A high percentage of youngsters are growing up in an extended family and spoke frequently of uncles and grandparents. Family encouragement to do well in school seemed to decline consistently from a solid level of support by the parents of the higher performers to little if any encouragement of the lower performing students.

- Models - Role models for the youngsters interviewed were all immediate or extended family members or slightly older male friends. Most of those interviewed had difficulty indentifying idols or persons they admired outside their personal interaction circles. Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and the usual star athletes were offered by most when forced outside the interaction circle.

- Students' perceptions of being a black male - Black male youngsters interviewed in this effort did not view their race and gender as disadvantaging characteristics. In a few cases (primarily in the higher or middle performing groups), reference was made to racial attitudes on the part of school officials as presenting problems and limiting conditions. But a clear majority of these youngsters assumed responsibility for their own conditions and expressed the belief that they had about the same opportunity to succeed as their peers. The lower performers consistently demonstrated more personal strength and independence and seemed more self-actualized. Throughout the interviews I had the impression that these youngsters had accepted their plight at a level that not only precludes challenge but left them seemingly unconscious of their at-risk status.

Years ago, I bemoaned the plight of the black male student in our system. That feeling motivated my observations and study in this area and the same feeling keeps me going today. But after looking more closely at the other areas and aspects of this child's existence, I am convinced that he fares better with us in many respects than in the other settings of his life.

Given all that we know about the formation of self-concept, personality, and identity, it must be developmentally influencing for the black male child to look at the environment and observe his image as the dominant character in the shadows and undesirable situations of society. Nationally, approximately fifty percent of all black families are headed by females

with no consistent male figure present. Stationary street corner hustlers or vagabonds are more frequently black males than any other group and certain other group members in this category are frequently supervised and controlled by black males. The Bill Moyer special on the black family and CBS's more recent special entitled "48 Hours on Crack Street" have heightened national awareness of this undesirable image. The image of this troubled existence by a disproportionate percentage of the black male group looks back from the mirror at the young black male child and too frequently answers his call for identity.

Violent crime statistics, as reported in the 1985 Uniform Crime Report issued by the North Carolina Department of Justice, listed the black male as the leading perpetrator of such crimes. Blacks make up twenty-five percent of the total population of North Carolina. Of all acts of murder committed by males confirmed during 1985, black male offenders were convicted in 56.8 percent of the cases. In acts of forceable rape black males were convicted in 63.3 percent of all cases. Perhaps an even stronger signal to the black male child is the fact that while the black male also leads in the percentage of aggrevated assaults, the majority of such assaults are committed against the black female and can be assumed to be often in the presence of the child.

North Carolina's Central Prison for males manages 823 inmates. Black males make up 56.5 percent of that population. A closer examination of the population reveals that blacks were convicted for the more serious crimes and are serving the longer sentences. During the late summer of 1986, this writer spent forty hours in study, observation, and interviews involving the inmate population at Central Prison and the Triangle Correctional Institute also located in Raleigh. Eight inmates were interviewed individually. All interviews were recorded. The following five major discussion areas were probed during the interviews.

- Things recalled from childhood that could be classified as "good things" and things that were recalled as "bad things". Inmates were asked to talk about the good and bad things that they remembered from their early years.

- Feelings about and involvement in the family while growing up...relationships and experiences with family members, especially parents, were probed.

- The school experience...feelings, relationships, successes and failures were all discussed.

- Personal models, idols or people they recalled looking up to and wanting to be like.

- Relationships with females...mother, sister, lover or wife. Their feelings about the relationships, the female character and her influence on their lives were probed.

Each inmate was given an overview of the study and something of my perception of the problem that black males seem to be experiencing. All seemed genuinely interested in contributing. Two inmates were significantly distracted by the recording apparatus and seemed a bit more interested in performing for the recorder in one case and for the video camera in the other. A third was seriously limited in ability and unable to comprehend and communicate reducing his capacity to contribute. The other five inmates responded depthfully and openly in all areas. Certain responses were consistent throughout the sessions and are offered below by discussion area:

- There was a consistent pattern of few "good things" being offered. Even when incidents were recalled and discussed as good things, something negative about them usually appeared before the discussion concluded. Bad things were frequent. The death of a loved one or the break up of a family was usually the first offering.

- There was an internalized appreciation for the family. There was a compulsion to credit the parent with having done the best they could with what they had to work with. Full acceptance of deprivation and emotional strain was consistent throughout the interviews. When obvious family failures were recognized, the inmates searched in earnest for excuses. However, in the face of such recognition of the worth of the family, four of the five contributing inmates demonstrated an early restlessness with home and acknowledged the desire to leave prematurely. "The family was good to me. I did good there, but somehow always just wanted to leave."

- The inmates viewed close family members as models in most cases, fathers, stepfathers, and uncles most frequently. Most were poor models in that they either didn't show proper caring or were weak in some other respect. During earlier conversation, an inmate would have spoken about difficulty interacting with his stepfather and yet when asked to identify the person he most admired as a child and wanted to grow up to be like, he offered after brief reflection, his stepfather. Only two of the five looked beyond the family to identify people they admired. Male characters were identified in all cases.

- School was a failing experience for all but two of the inmates. None was comfortable in the school setting. Most were quick to identify schooling as something from which they should have gotten more. However, graduation from high school was the goal they didn't attain and nothing more extensive than a high school education was even conceptualized. Emphasis was placed on getting through school and not on excelling. One very revealing inmate followed his football skills to the collegiate level before yielding to the legacy of his development. None of the five contributing inmates would be classified as troublemakers in school, but all were anxious to leave. They were simply never turned on to learning, nor given to expect much of themselves in this setting.

- Most inmates demonstrated at least a noticeable hesitancy in discussing female relationships. The mother figure was viewed as a favorite and one who wanted the best for and from them. She was a symbol of strength and "in control" of things in most cases. They expressed disappointment at failing to satisfy the mother figure and in one case "hurt" was associated with feelings of interaction with mother. Multi-lovers were the preference of most inmates. They were indeed "moving targets" where female inter-relations were concerned. A quiet but consistent inquiry, "What do they expect?" was either stated or implied frequently. Two inmates verbalized the desire to be better understood by women. The black female was described as demanding, bossy and "something else" by a majority of the inmates.

- The most consistent response from all inmates was in reaction to the following question. "Has being a black male and growing up as a black male child been a disadvantage to you that you would not have had, had you been born to another group?" After reflection and in some cases discussion, each inmate assumed full responsibility for the outcome of his life. They consistently stated that they could have made it different. Full blame was assumed by the inmates.

A report in the March 17, 1986 issue of a U.S. News and World Report speaks of the progress of blacks in our society over the past two decades. The article, "A Nation Apart," suggests that a young black man with a college education today earns about as much as his white

counterpart. The article goes on to explore an emerging black underclass which reaches deep into the nation's black population. But what of this black male with a college education? Is his number growing? And what can we conclude from the observations and findings referenced earlier in this paper? At least the following conclusions seem safe:

- The black male student in the Wake County Public School System lags behind his peers in the academic learning experience.
- The black male child is more likely to be suspended from school and/or to drop out of school prematurely than his peers.
- The black male child tends to identify with male models within the family setting or at least within personal interaction range of the child. This connection does not appear to be influenced by the basic character, condition or response attitude of the model.
- The black male child development process produces an adult who disproportionately populates situations of wasteful human existence in our society.

William Glasser offers the desire to fulfill oneself as a human being as the primary motivation for functioning. In his book The Identity Society, he develops the concept that each of us is personally engaged in a search for acceptance as a person rather than as a performer of a task. Identity generally preceeds acceptance. Therefore, normal child development forces identity formation regardless of its suitability to the individual's environmental conditions or to the expectations of society. Researchers have pondered the factors believed to impact identity formation in search of standard relationships and order of appearance. Regardless of patterns of formation and sequence, crystalized imagery will inevitably dictate the path of human development and ultimately determine its destination.

When the black male child reaches that critical stage in identity formation and looks in the environmental mirror for an answer to the question "Who am I?" the response frequently tends to instill a low self concept and the acceptance of a nonproductive standard of existence. There would appear to be cause to suspect that a network of negative factors is at work against this child as he struggles to become an adult. The following components of this network seem obvious to the writer:

- The absence of a sturdy and contributing male parent in a major percentage of black families denies the black male child a readily accessible model to positively influence his development. Youngsters must be able to touch their models for development. There must be a connection with the individual if the relationship is to be contributing. The black male child must frequently explore the extended family for this connection and in some cases is left to search the more distant corners of the environmental mirror for answers. With respect to developmental models, the black male child is at serious risk.

- The black male child experiences perplexing and frequently transitioning relationships with females that challenge identity formation and influence development from a number of angles. From the wide ranging influences of mother (or grandmother) to the expectations of lover and wife, the black male is likely to witness behaviors that send contradictory signals as to his behavior and development. A "man-child" status is often forced by early teenage years when there is no male parent in the family. He is often the object of transferred hostilities experienced by a mother determined to have him be something that his father was not. Perceptions of the female character are often blurred by this experience contributing to a negative cycle of stimulation between the sexes.

- The black male child seems more directly at risk developmentally in the school setting than his counterparts. The public school setting presents at least three challenges most likely to attack him in his most vulnerable areas. First, the female teacher can continue a tendency toward overdependency or represent yet another interpretation hurdle. The black male child reaches the age where a crush on the teacher is a natural tendency and faces yet another confusing signal from the white middle class female who is often ill-equipped to handle this developmental show of affection.

  Secondly, a quiet but very real competition develops between the black male and his white male counterpart. It begins as a very inactive dynamic in the early school years and goes on to become the motivation for concessions on the part of the black male as he determines to establish himself in a different and frequently less constructive way. Two years ago as a new Superintendent, I visited a fourth grade class in our system as a guest speaker. Following my remarks I asked (with great trepidation) if there were any questions. The dominating element in the class of twenty-seven youngsters was a cluster of six or seven white males who attacked me with inquiries about the stock market, the advisability of the Shearon Harris Nuclear Plant under construction, and year round school. Their bright eyes and confident manner suggested dinner table discussions with their corporate fathers in preparation for the Superintendent's visit. The cluster of black boys seated beside them could only look and listen. While being taken to the next classroom by one of the black

youngsters, I questioned his silence during the sessions. He replied, "Oh, it's like that all the time. I never get a chance to say anything."

And finally, sequential and continuous skill development is seriously hampered for the black male child as he struggles with the previously identified dynamics of development. He gets behind in school early and the pattern continues until discomfort or pain forces withdrawal, overreaction and in many cases premature separation.

All of my instincts, observations and findings lead me to believe strongly that the dynamics of human development are somehow programmed for failure where the black male child is concerned. Even for those of us who noticeably succeed, a heavier price is paid than can be afforded by the main body of our category or group. We live in a male dominated society. While the pursuit of equal opportunities for women and the civil rights movement in general have brought attention to gross inequities in our way of life, the character out front has not changed.

Given this near-reverse posture of the sexes, the black race is drifting even more out of sync with the majority culture as our male character struggles to establish and sustain himself. Our progress in today's highly visible and individually competitive lifestyle is and will continue to be significantly influenced by this condition. I am disturbed by our failure to recognize and focus on this societal problem as evidenced by my review of the literature, which has been disappointing. I am committed to further study of the functional pieces of the problem and to rallying the resources of our nation in a search for solutions.

God bless the black female...for she has sustained us. But we cannot continue to produce a black male population so disproportionately disinfranchised and one that holds majority representation in the shadows and situations of wasteful human existence in our society. Whatever the problem...we must understand it. Whatever the solutions...we must find them. The model for black male child development is broken...we must fix it.